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ABSTRACT

This factsheet considers dropping out of school from the dropout's point of view: reasons for dropping out, life after leaving school, and the dropouts' own evaluation of their decision to leave school. It identifies a dislike of school, low academic achievement, and a desire to work as key reasons for dropping out. Thirteen resource documents are listed. (NB)

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HIGHLIGHTS

...An ERIC/CAPS Digest

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The Dropout's Perspective on Leaving School

Introduction

Researchers and theorists have studied and written about the reasons that students drop out of high school, what happens to these dropouts, and what the future holds for them. But what do the dropouts themselves have to say about their decision to drop out? How do they see their lives after dropping out? What advice would they offer high school students today who are thinking of dropping out?

Reasons for Dropping Out

What Dropouts Say. Asked why they decided to leave high school, dropouts from the past 30 years consistently cited three major reasons (Curley, Sawyer, & Savitsky, 1971; "High School," 1984; "High School," 1977; Kumar & Bergstrand, 1979; "Mother," 1982; Norris, Wheeler, & Finley, 1980; Peng & Takai, 1983; Stetler, 1959):

1. A dislike of school and a view that school is boring and not relevant to their needs.
2. Low academic achievement, poor grades, or academic failure.
3. A need for money and a desire to work full-time.

Many female dropouts also cited pregnancy or marriage as reasons for dropping out. These issues, however, will not be addressed in this digest.

What Researchers Say. Studies of high school dropouts conducted over the past 30 years in several states and nationwide have identified these same three basic reasons for dropping out (see references cited above).

1. **Dislike of School.** Consistent with the dropouts' reported dislike of and boredom with school, researchers have found a pattern of absenteeism among dropouts when they were still in school and a low rate of participation in extracurricular activities.
2. **Low Academic Achievement.** Researchers have found that lowered performance in either reading or mathematics tended to increase the likelihood that a student would leave school. Data suggest that failure often begins in elementary school.
3. **Desire to Work.** High school dropouts tend to belong to families of low socioeconomic status ("Mother," 1982; Peng & Takai, 1983). This finding is supported by reports of the dropouts themselves that they left school planning to work full-time. The next section examines how these plans worked out for the dropouts.

Life After Dropping Out

Employment Issues. Dropouts interviewed in a Phoenix, Arizona study (Norris et al., 1980) reported quitting school either because they already had a job (15.7%) or because they wanted to work (37.1%). A follow-up study revealed that far fewer respondents were able to get a job, work at a job they already had, or learn a trade than had planned to do so.

Interviews with other dropouts confirm the difficulty that dropouts have in finding and keeping jobs:

- Of dropouts interviewed in a Wisconsin study (Kumar & Bergstrand, 1979), 60% reported being employed full-time and another 8% reported being employed part-time. One-third of employed respondents reported earning less than minimum wage.
- Of dropouts interviewed in Philadelphia ("High School," 1977), 46% reported being unemployed. Of employed dropouts, 37% held unskilled jobs or worked in low-paying service occupations.
- Of dropouts interviewed in Connecticut (Stetler, 1959) 25% of dropouts reported working full-time while 24% reported being unemployed and looking for work.
- Of Dade County, Florida dropouts interviewed ("High School," 1984), 60% reported being unemployed and not enrolled in any vocational or academic program.
- Of dropouts interviewed in the *High School and Beyond* study (Peng & Takai, 1983), approximately 60% of males and 33% of females reported working full- or part-time while 27% of males and 31% of females were unemployed and looking for work.

Dropouts often have lower occupational aspirations than do their peers. A study of dropouts and high school students in Dade County, Florida ("High School," 1984) who were matched for race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status found that those who stayed in school had a quite different view of their lives compared with dropouts. The majority of dropouts reported wanting blue collar jobs, while in-school students were almost equally divided among blue collar, white collar, and professional occupational aspirations. It is important to note that the in-school group consisted of potential dropouts still in school rather than high achievers.

Unemployment rates are very high among high school dropouts and dropouts earn less future income than do high school graduates. Most employed dropouts in the Dade County, Florida study reported they were earning minimum wage while one-third of employed dropouts in the Wisconsin study reported earning less than minimum wage. Employed dropouts in a variety of studies reported

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being employed in unskilled jobs or in low-paying service occupations offering little opportunity for upward mobility.

Return to Education. Although many dropouts report leaving school because of boredom or a dislike of school, many return to some type of educational program once they realize how limited their opportunities are without a high school diploma.

Approximately two-thirds of dropouts interviewed in a 1956-57 study (Stetler, 1959) planned to complete their high school education in the future, either through day school, night school, or training programs in the armed services. Twenty-nine percent of dropouts interviewed in Massachusetts (Curley et al., 1971) returned to school after dropping out and 26% of dropouts interviewed in the Philadelphia study were back in some educational program.

In the Phoenix, Arizona study, dropouts were interviewed who had enrolled in alternative schools. They reported returning to school because they: (1) wanted to graduate so they could have more opportunities; (2) needed more education to support themselves or their families; (3) saw no future in what they were doing outside of school; or (4) were bored with being out of school.

Dropouts Evaluate Their Decision

Some researchers have asked dropouts how they felt about their decision to leave school. Peng and Takai (1983) found that 51% of males and 55% of females considered leaving school a bad decision. Almost 50% of dropouts interviewed by Stetler (1959) reported, in retrospect, that their decision to drop out was a bad one while 35% reported it was a good decision. Of dropouts interviewed by Curley et al. (1971), 37.7% thought dropping out was a bad decision while 33.5% thought it was the right decision.

Dropout Essays

An important resource for persons working with potential dropouts is the collection of essays, *Is School Important: Essays by People Who Know* (1987), papers written by Alaskan dropouts enrolled in a General Educational Development (GED) correspondence program. In their papers, students discuss why they quit school, how well they did in school, what they learned there, and whether it was difficult for them in the "real world" without a diploma. They offer advice to other students who are considering dropping out of school.

Conclusion

There are numerous programs and activities designed to lower the dropout rate and keep students in school through high school graduation. The vast majority of these programs are staffed by individuals who place high value on school and education. Perhaps potential dropouts also need to hear from individuals who at one time shared their own views of school as boring, irrelevant, a waste of time, and not for them, individuals who chose to drop out of school. Hearing from experienced dropouts could provide a new perspective and help the potential dropout to reevaluate his position and choose to graduate from high school.

Resource Documents

Bleuer, J. C. (1987). *Counseling underachievers: A counselor's guide to helping students improve their academic performance.* Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan, ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services. (CG 020 195)

Curley, T. J., Sawyer, A. P., & Savitsky, A. M. (1971). *A critical analysis of school leavers in the Quincy public school system. (1969-1970).* Quincy, MA: Quincy Public Schools. (ED 051 512)

High school drop outs and the inner city. Final report of the grand jury in the circuit court of the eleventh judicial circuit of Florida in and for the county of Dade. (1984). Miami, FL: Dade County Grand Jury. (ED 251 544)

High school dropouts: Highlight results of a survey of Philadelphia public high school pupils who left school in 1975-76. (1977). Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia School District. (ED 159 508)

Is school important: Essays by people who know. (1987). Juneau, AK: Alaska State Department of Education. (ED 278 889)

Kumar, V., & Bergstrand, J. (1979). *Follow-up of high school non-completers, 1967-1976.* Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin. (ED 222 602)

"Mother got tired of taking care of my baby." A study of dropouts (Publication number: 82.44). (1982). Austin, TX: Austin Independent School District. (ED 233 102)

Norris, C., Wheeler, L., & Finley, M. J. (1980). *Special report: The dropout problem* (Report no. 22:11 79/80:013a). Phoenix, AZ: Phoenix Union High School District. (ED 209 265)

Peck, N., Law, A., & Mills, R. C. (1987). *Dropout prevention: What we have learned.* Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan, ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services. (ED 279 989)

Peng, S. S., & Takai, R. T. (1983). *High school dropouts: Descriptive information from "High School and Beyond."* Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. (ED 236 366)

Secondary school dropouts. Executive summary. (1981). St. Paul, MN: Minnesota State Department of Education. (ED 203 077)

Stetler, H. G. (1959). *Comparative study of negro and white dropouts in selected Connecticut high schools.* Hartford, CT: Connecticut Commission on Civil Rights. (ED 020 211)

Walz, G. R. (1987). *Combating the school dropout problem: Proactive strategies for school counselors.* Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan, ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services. (CG 020 240)

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